

Two Bits

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Back when I went to college a million years ago, North Dakota State University didn't offer an agricultural communications major, so, with the help of my adviser, I built one myself — a mass communications major paired with a general agriculture minor. To earn the minor, I needed coursework in four agricultural disciplines. Animal science, crop and weed science, microbiology and floriculture were easy picks — until every floriculture class filled before I registered. Rather than stay an extra semester, I reluctantly swapped floriculture for the only available option — entomology.

I was less than thrilled. I couldn't imagine sitting through that many bug classes, much less ever using them in my career. However, I was convinced they'd be easy A's and require considerably less effort than the rest of my load.

Boy, was I wrong — on all three counts. Those upper-level entomology classes were some of my toughest and far more interesting than I had imagined. I did my senior term paper on the orange blossom wheat midge. Admittedly, I chose it because it had a fun name and I came up with a great lead paragraph playing off Johnny Cash's famous "Orange Blossom Special" fiddle tune. Eerily, that same year, the midge reared its ugly head in North Dakota, wreaking havoc on one of the state's most significant crops, causing severe yield loss and diminishing grain quality.

It turns out my accidental minor has become surprisingly relevant. That's because pests have become a prevailing topic in the beef industry and my day-to-day work this year. They sure were at the recent Beef Industry Summer Business Conference we attended. Of course, there was a host of issues tackled in the policy meetings, ranging from Livestock Risk Protection insurance to fake meat, but New World screwworm (NWS),

Asian longhorned tick and the Lone star tick took center stage in the discussions. (Before one of my old professors rescinds my grade, I should point out that ticks are *not* insects; they are actually arachnids, more closely related to spiders, scorpions and mites than true "bugs.")

As of July 23, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) confirmed 42 total NWS cases — 10 active and 32 inactive — with all but one in Texas. At the meeting, federal officials said USDA's enhanced surveillance and beefed-up sterile fly production efforts are proceeding as planned and that the screwworms' incursion is expected to lose momentum as fall approaches. The plan is to hold the line until fall brings relief and to keep building infrastructure to support more sterile flies to combat the problem. The new Texas facility is expected to be up and running in mid- to late 2027. Experts reminded convention-goers that the NWS is an animal health, not a food safety, issue and that it is not infectious, as it is not passed from animal to animal or from animals to people.

Much of the discussion centered around NWS biology, surveillance and prevention, although the related topic of the Mexican border closure was another on the minds of many. None of the federal government officials offered any indication if or when the border would reopen, but producers, of course, recognize the cascade of short- and long-term market implications such a decision would have across the country.

The ticks generated even more discussion than the NWS. Like the screwworm, the Asian longhorned tick is slowly making its way northward across the United States. The invasive pest is causing massive herd infestations and spreading often-fatal bovine theileriosis with no direct cure. What makes it even trickier is that it reproduces asexually,

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